

T³: Trustee Training Tips

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THE SLOW MOTION BOARD MEETING

New trustees are constantly being appointed to library boards across the state, but the beginning of the state fiscal year brings the largest number at any one time. That means by next month a significant number of novice trustees will be attending their first board meeting. So how do you make that experience meaningful and establish a good relationship immediately?

One way is to conduct that first meeting in “slow motion.” That means the President, or whoever is chairing the meeting, takes time to explain what is going on with each part of the agenda. While approving the minutes of the previous meeting might be obvious, explaining the financial reporting done and the actions required by the board may not be so universally understood. (It nearly always confuses newcomers when the vouchers are approved at each meeting *after* many of the bills have already been paid.) Explaining that both the Library Director’s and the Regional Consultant’s reports are standing agenda items can help the new person understand how typical board meetings are structured. Like so for any committee reports, Friends of the Library reports, reports from key staff, etc. that are common to your meetings.

While these agenda items are important, it is even more important to remember the new trustees are not aware of the history or the purpose of the business items under discussion. Even if the board president and the library director have conducted an orientation for the newly appointed board members, explaining the current issues before the board, it will go a long way to furthering workable comprehension if each item is explained as you go along. Not only the history of what has brought the item to the agenda, but what the board hopes to accomplish, how this fits into the library’s overall mission and long-range plan, and what possible consequences it may generate are all pieces of information that will help the novice quickly catch up with the rest of the board.

Even simple things can be improved upon with a “catch-up” explanation: whether or not there are assigned seats at the board table (formally or by habit); whether or not refreshments are enjoyed during the meeting or shared as pre- or post-meeting socializing. No one wants to make a *faux pas*, especially at the very beginning when board relationships are new.

Think how awkward it feels when you join a conversation already in progress and no one stops to fill you in on what the group is talking about. The same applies here.

MANAGING THE MEETING

The presiding officer, usually the President, determines the flow of the meeting, sets the pace, and is generally responsible for the overall efficiency of the meeting. As such, s/he should:

- open the meeting at the time it is supposed to begin by taking the chair and calling the members to order;
- ascertain then and throughout the meeting that a quorum is present;
- follow the agenda;
- clarify what is happening and what is being voted on at all times;
- initiate general consent when appropriate;
- maintain order and decorum by dealing firmly with whispering, aside conversations, and frivolous or delaying debate and motions;
- see that discussion (debate) is confined to the merits of the question;
- encourage *all* members of the board to participate in the discussion; prohibit a few from monopolizing the discussion;
- call for the question (vote) in a timely manner, allowing enough discussion to address all sides of the issue, but not allowing debate to continue beyond what is necessary;
- remain calm and deal fairly with all sides regardless of personal opinion;
- have at hand the bylaws, board policies, rules of order, and any other documents to facilitate the transaction of business;
- declare the meeting recessed or adjourned as appropriate.

Note: The office to which one is elected is President (*n.*) and the action one takes in that office is to chair (*v.*) the meetings.

7 SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Organized and well run meetings not only accomplish more, but do so in less time. Most everyone is busy, busy, busy and saving time may be the greatest gift you can give others and yourself. Here are 7 Simple Solutions to help you achieve that goal:

1. **Have a written agenda with clear objectives.** Don't simply list "New Business" and "Old Business" but include the items to be discussed. Even better, give a brief annotation on each.
2. **Make sure the meeting venue has been organized.** This is something that may be delegated to library staff, but it must be done. Ensure the meeting area is quiet, with no distractions, and the space is adequate.
3. **Start and finish on time.** Respect your time and everyone else's.
4. **Have an effective presiding officer.** The President is usually the one who chairs the meetings and it is important that s/he be an efficient manager of time. Unsure who to elect? At the beginning of the meeting count to three. At three, everyone points to the person they believe will keep the meeting on track. The person with the most votes is nominated.
5. **Circulate the minutes within 48 hours.** This allows everyone to read them while they can still remember what transpired at the meeting and catch errors. See page 3 for more information about timely minutes.
6. **Stand up and stretch every 30 minutes.** It's good for mind and body.
7. **Ensure all mobile phones and pagers are turned off.** Believe it or not, people have survived without their phones for a couple of hours and lived to tell the tale.

TIMELY MINUTES

Does this scenario sound familiar? The library board minutes of the previous meeting are mailed with the agenda, financial reports, etc. a few days prior to the upcoming meeting. At the meeting the President calls for corrections or additions to the minutes from the last meeting—which took place exactly a month ago. Can you remember the details well enough to find any errors now? Maybe, but maybe not.

Why is this so important? So what if a small detail here or there gets misreported? The answer is maybe nothing, but maybe a lot. Once approved by the board, the minutes become the official record of what happened. Even if all trustees can remember it really didn't happen that way after all, the misinformation stands as what did happen, legally speaking. While this might not be significant in many matters, it can be crucial in a lawsuit or testimony before a court—or even the court of public opinion. Approving the *correct* version of the minutes is necessary every single month.

One way to make sure the minutes are correct is to read them while the events of the meeting are still fresh in everyone's mind. Waiting nearly a month is not fresh for most busy people with hundreds of things on their minds between meetings. This can easily be accomplished by having the Secretary, or whoever takes the minutes, do so on a laptop as the meeting takes place. S/he can then email them to everyone and they will be in your Inbox before you get home. That same day you can read the minutes of your meeting and increase your ability to spot errors or inconsistencies many times over.

The minute-taker doesn't have a laptop? Surely the library does. Reserve it for board meetings and make that a priority.

OPENING WITH A PRAYER?

Recently the question was posed by a Kentucky public library trustee: can we open our meetings with a prayer? With recent attention to high school graduations by the media, this is not an unlikely question to be raised by other library boards.

The short answer is “no.” The reasons being the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and that public libraries are a part of local government be they parts of city or county government or special taxing districts. It sometimes surprises trustees to realize that they, too, are “government bureaucrats.”

The First Amendment includes what is referred to as the “establishment clause,” which basically says the government cannot establish religion. The courts have found, repeatedly, that government sponsored prayer, which is what would be taking place in a library board meeting, is unconstitutional. The only “loophole” is to go all or nothing. That would mean making sure there were prayers that were Jewish, Muslim, Scientology, and all flavors of Christian—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, LDS—to name just a few.

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LIBRARY LETTERS

Dear Marian Librarian,

Our trustee information has a different Oath of Office than the one our County Judge-Executive used—the one about not fighting a duel. Which should we use?

-- Troubled Trustee

Dear Troubled,

Kentucky's Oath of Office that requires a person to swear s/he has not fought a duel is quaint and colorful, hence the fondness for using it. However, that Oath is specifically for those *elected* to office and trustees are not elected, but *appointed*. The one provided by KDLA, found in the Trustee Manual, is far better, as it asks you to swear to be a good library trustee, but sometimes the reality is that the elected officials' Oath is the only one your Judge-Executive will use. Swearing to uphold the Constitution of Kentucky has little to do with trusteeship, but it doesn't negate your responsibilities.

QUOTABLE QUOTES

"Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. They are engines of change, windows on the world, lighthouses erected in the sea of time."

-- Barbara W. Tuchman, historian and author

"A **Good Library**
can become a
Great Library
only when the
Good Board
becomes a
Great Board."

-- Dan Cain, Cain Consulting Group

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